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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001864

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER SUPPORTS ARMY COMMANDER
FOR PRESIDENT

REF: A. BEIRUT 1855
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1854
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 1852

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr reported on November 24 that the army's deployment in downtown Beirut was proceeding smoothly, and he expected the situation to remain calm for the next few days (which it did). He fully supports Saad Hariri's "Plan B" to elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. Murr had received assurances from several sources that Sleiman was not Hizballah's candidate and that Aoun firmly opposed him as well. He also did believe Sleiman's candidacy was a Syrian trap, outlining the reasons why he believed the Commander would make a good president, though he admitted work needed to be done to get all of March 14 on board. End summary.

MAINTAINING THE CALM IN BEIRUT

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr on November 24, one day after President Lahoud (Murr's former father-in-law) left office. A relaxed Murr told the Ambassador he had expected Lahoud to leave peacefully, as he did, although there had been a "grey period" during which Hizballah and Syria were pressuring Lahoud to appoint a second government. The LAF deployment in Beirut (some 16,000 troops) was proceeding smoothly, he reported, thanks to clear orders on the ground. He had cautioned Hariri and Jumblatt not to send people into the streets, telling them to let the LAF handle the front-line. He predicted the situation would remain calm until the Annapolis conference, suggesting that Syria had asked Hizballah to remain quiet for a few days.

SLEIMAN IS NOT A SYRIAN TRAP

[1](#)3. (C) Murr, noting that Sleiman had told him his November 24 meeting with the Ambassador (Ref C) was "one of the best,"

confirmed that momentum was building within March 14 for a Sleiman presidency, stating that he, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt, and PM Siniora were all on board. Majority leader Saad Hariri had first raised the idea with Murr two days earlier. Saad reportedly was convinced Sleiman was not Hizballah's candidate because, when he was negotiating with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Berri had ruled out Sleiman because of the need for a constitutional amendment, and because Hizballah would never accept him.

¶4. (C) Murr said he had held a two-hour meeting with Siniora during which the PM swore on the Koran that he now would accept a constitutional amendment to pave the way for Sleiman's candidacy, a change from Siniora's previous strong objection, because it was "the only way out for the country."

Siniora, like Murr and Hariri, was convinced that Hizballah did not want Sleiman, and reportedly told Murr he respected the General because he was the only one who told him to his face that he did not want him as prime minister. Siniora also told Murr that he had discussed Sleiman in his meeting with the Patriarch earlier that day, and that the Patriarch had responded that under this atmosphere, after the Patriarch's list had failed, if this was March 14's choice, he would not block it.

¶5. (C) Murr then sent his father Michel to Berri to confirm Saad's assertion that Sleiman was not Hizballah's secret candidate. Berri reportedly told Michel Murr that Syria had only three candidates: Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, Jean Obeid, or Michel Edde. Why not Sleiman, Michel Murr asked? His words are good, but his actions are bad, Berri reportedly answered; he facilitated UNSCR 1701, he has sent hundreds of army officers to the U.S. and Europe on training programs, he sent troops into Nahr al-Barid despite Hizballah's warning, and, his first crime, he caused the 2/28/05 collapse of the Omar Karami government two weeks

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after Rafiq Hariri's murder by ordering the army to open the streets for demonstrators. In addition, Berri reportedly argued, Sleiman is from the same region as the Patriarch, so he'll have the Maronites welcoming him home, rather than a region under Syrian control. Syria would not even accept Sleiman for a two-year presidency, Berri said; the most they would agree to is one additional year as Commander in Chief.

¶6. (C) Michel Murr also met with Aoun, who "did not want to hear" about a Sleiman presidency; "I hate him, I can't smell him!" Aoun reportedly said. Aoun preferred chaos to Sleiman, who did not respect or protect Aoun, and never visited him or answered his calls or received his messengers. As LAF Commander, Aoun delayed Sleiman's promotion, Elias explained.

Michel Murr reportedly accused Hizballah of hiding behind Aoun's "no" vote to block the election. "I don't care," was Aoun's reply. Elias said he believed Aoun's goal was to get either Pierre Daccache or Michel Edde for president for a year and a half (i.e., until the 2009 legislative elections).

¶7. (C) Elias dismissed the idea that Sleiman's candidacy was a Syrian trap. The Syrians, he admitted, had pretended to favor Sleiman, but what they were really after was the support of the army. Sleiman himself recognized this, Elias claimed, reportedly apologizing to his boss for the last two years, stating that the Syrians were lying.

MAKING THE CASE FOR SLEIMAN

¶8. (C) Murr said the LAF's actions at Nahr al-Barid against Fatah al-Islam extremists demonstrated Sleiman would be tough on terrorism. He would pursue diplomatic relations with Syria and gave Murr assurances that he would implement UNSCR 1701. Murr said the two already had agreed on names of the next LAF Commander (BG Jean Kahwaji or Francois Hajjz Harari) and next LAF G-2 Intelligence Director (Current G-2 Director

in the Mount Lebanon region, Joseph Najm). Murr added that the current G-2 Director, Georges Khoury, was already taken care of; given his close relations with the Maronite Patriarch, he would be Lebanon's next envoy to the Vatican. Sleiman also reportedly told Murr that he would comply with Hariri's request to remove Walid Jezzini (close to Hizballah) from the head of Surete Generale. Murr himself would either continue as Minister of Defense or become Minister of Interior. And with Sleiman as president, the army will be on March 14's side.

¶9. (C) Murr admitted that Sleiman had been weak on Hizballah's arms, but argued that, as president, he would be forced to find a solution. This was a problem for the entire country, and Sleiman would no longer be able to make excuses.

BUT HOW TO CONVINCE MARCH 14 ALLIES?

¶10. (C) Murr admitted, however, that March 14 would have a problem selling Sleiman to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, whose forces had killed LAF soldiers during the civil war. Geagea will always oppose a military option, he said. He did not, however, foresee a problem with Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad, whom he claimed secretly sent her son Michel to Sleiman to tell him that their family would "support him to the end." (Comment. Our meeting with Nayla suggests she is more in tune with Geagea. See Ref A. End comment.) Transportation Minister Mohamad Safadi was a friend of Sleiman's, Murr said, so no problem there.

¶11. (C) Moreover, some Aoun MPs (Selim Salhab, Ghassan Moukheiber, Walid Khoury) and allies (Michel Murr, Ily Skaff) as well as the Tashnaq Armenian party would support Sleiman. Aoun would only have his Free Patriotic Movement MPs left, Murr predicted. Murr reportedly told Sleiman that he needed him to produce three or four Hizballah MPs to bring Berri on board. Sleiman reportedly responded that he could not guarantee he would be able; "I don't think they want me, and I don't want to lie to you and say yes," he reportedly said.

AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION

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¶12. (C) Murr explained the procedures for amending the constitution to allow Sleiman to run for president. First, the cabinet would vote to amend the constitution (Note. This would require a two-thirds majority, or 16 out of 23 surviving ministers. After the November 2006 walkout of six opposition ministers, 17 ministers remain, one more than the 16 need for a two-thirds majority, though it is not clear whether all the Christian ministers would support a constitutional amendment for Sleiman. End note.) Murr claimed cabinet had been scheduled to meet on November 24 (at the time of the Ambassador's meeting) to take the first step to amend the constitution, but Murr had insisted that they wait until after the Annapolis conference and until they had had an opportunity to discuss the idea with other March 14 partners. He admitted that Tourism Minister Joseph Sarkis, a Geagea ally, might present a problem, and with Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri in Annapolis, they would not have the 16 votes in favor.

¶13. (C) Second, cabinet refers the issue to parliament, where a two-thirds majority also is needed. The second step is meant to call the opposition's bluff, Murr explained. If Berri refuses to convene parliament to vote, then it is clear the pro-Syrian opposition does not want a president. If he accepts, it means he is recognizing the legitimacy of the government, something the opposition has refused to do for more than a year. In recognizing the legitimacy of the government in passing the decree proposing the constitutional amendment, then the pro-Syrians will have, in effect, post-facto accepted all decisions taken by the Siniora

cabinet.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) As we will report septel, a Sleiman presidency has its advantages and disadvantages. Whereas, however, March 14 was fully united behind, say, Nassib Lahoud, that is not the case with Michel Sleiman. Saad Hariri, Elias Murr and others have quite a bit of homework to do if they decide to proceed down this route -- or risk creating permanent cracks within March 14. What we like best about this option is that it would definitely clip Michel Aoun's wings permanently. But, while we would welcome seeing an end to Aoun's outrageously irresponsible behavior, we don't want our March 14 friends to fall into a cleverly placed Syrian trap (and one that requires the type of constitutional amendment we've opposed for the past three-plus years). We expect that exploration of the Sleiman option is going to move very quickly, however -- Saudi Ambassador Khoja went to see Geagea today to try to get the Lebanese Forces on board. If we are going to intervene one way or another, we need to do so now. End comment.

FELTMAN